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Door Slammed Finger

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“Door Slammed Finger,” by Deborah Obielodan

Instructor’s Note

In a Literacy Memoir, the writer must accomplish multiple rhetorical goals at once. The writer must create a dramatic scene in which characters move, speak, and interact. At the same time, the writer must analyze from present perspective how a literacy event has taught her something about herself or about others. Literacy Memoir writers tell a story about one specific “literacy moment” along their literacy journey and evaluate how that literacy experience has been significant in their lives. Literacy Memoir writers are also conscious of the fact that even though they are writing about their own lives, they are writing for an audience. In “Door Slammed Finger,” Deborah Obielodan depicts the courage that helped her navigate new cultural literacies after she moved from Nigeria to the United States when she was a young child. How does Deborah create a scene that allows the reader to see and hear what she experienced when she was small? Explain how Deborah conveys the emotions she felt at this time. What does this essay suggest about the relationship between cultural narratives and education? What might be significant for a reader in this essay?

Writer’s Biography

Deborah Obielodan is a freshman Business major. She is originally from Nigeria and has been living the United States for the past ten years. She enjoys reading and listening to music.

Door Slammed Finger

My fourth grade class gathered in front of the huge auditorium steps to take a picture. The girls giggled in their old fashion dresses and Amish looking hats while the boys looked stiff in their trousers and suspenders. We were headed to a colonial school. After teaching about the colonial times, our teacher, Mrs. K, decided to expose us to colonial schooling for a whole day.

We all loaded into the yellow school bus for the hour drive to our destination. The bus swerved and rocked.

And we all rocked with it as we went down the narrow road to the one room school house. The white washed school building stood alone in the middle of flat moist ground covered with grass. Tall evergreen trees overshadowed the building. And birds chirped overhead as the wind dispersed the fragrance of the spring flowers surrounding the trees.

The bus halts to a stop and my classmates and I hopped down from it. We paraded towards the steps up to the building with caution, pretending to be well trained colonial students. I slipped through the lone door located at the back of the building, careful not to slam the door behind me. The first thing that I saw was a huge black wood stove. The stove must have been inactive because the room was damp with the smell of old pine wood, probably from the rows of pews surrounding the stove. Our guide and teacher for the day, Mrs. Smith, positioned herself on the stage at the front of the room. The middle age woman, who looked like she has lived in the colonial time all her life, told us all about the life of a colonial student.

Each student had taken a seat before her and waited turns to correctly spell whatever word she dictated. Apparently the colonial students take part in this sort of spelling bee on weekly bases. “What torture,” I thought. A spelling bee once a year was enough humiliation for me.

“Next,” Mrs. Smith said with a stone face and I stepped up in front of her.

“She just got here from Africa,” said Mrs. K, standing across the room right behind the seated children.

“What does she know how to spell?” our colonial teacher asked Mrs. K. Mrs. Smith’s haughty posture, or maybe just these words that came out of her mouth, makes me cringe every time I see a colonial looking school building.

“Try something simple,” Mrs. K replied.

My heart skipped a beat as I realized what was going on. Mrs. Smith had to give me a simpler word than all my other classmates because I could not spell at their level. I felt the hot shame rush to my face. I stood as if I had just slammed my finger in the door. Slam. I remained still and calculated my emotions. Should I become angry, cry, or fake a smile? Of course I never thought of myself

as having a disadvantage. I was repulsed by the thought of Mrs. Smith graciously giving me a first grade level word while my classmates received fourth grade level words. Mrs. Smith dictated a word and I spelled the word. A fake smile on my face, I stepped away from the stage. And as I sank down into my seat my pride also sank.

I knew I should not hold a grudge. Mrs. K's and Mrs. Smith's decision to give me a simple word made sense. After all I was still adjusting to the new way of learning in America. I had just moved from Nigeria a few months earlier. I started at a new school in a new country two weeks after I had left my country. I knew the two women were just being logical, I just wished they had not made the decision before the whole class, or worse, in front of me.

I refused to admit that I could not spell the same words my classmates could spell. I rejected the thought that my American classmates were smarter than I was. Back home I was considered one of the smart students. So I convinced myself that the women were mistaken. They noticed my accent and automatically thought I could not spell. But I knew deep inside that my spelling ability did not meet my new school's fourth grade requirement. I would have to try harder than my fellow classmates to keep up.

Back in our modern classroom, Mrs. K sat on her stool behind her preacher's podium. Facing the students she asked, "Who was the president who helped freed the slaves?"

This time the door slammed harder on my finger. Slam. And I felt anger. I had heard about the slaves. They were related to my ancestors. The white people took them to their land and made them slaves. That's all I knew. And I was angry. I was embarrassed. Why has no one told me more? Why would I have to learn about the history of my ancestors' friends and relatives from a foreign land?

"Abraham Lincoln helped freed the slaves," declared the know-it-all of our class.

Abraham who? Lincoln—more than a type of car—who would have thought? Mrs. K later assigned us to memorize the whole list of the United States presidents. Of

course I was given only the first twenty presidents to memorize. I recited my twenty over and over until I knew them by heart.

I knew just what to do. I was going to prevent further embarrassment like this to insult my intelligence. I needed to prove myself. I needed to prove that I did not need an advantage. So I devoted myself to studying.

I worked on my weekly vocabulary list more than any other fourth grader I knew. I went home, took down the encyclopedia from the shelf, caressed its cold red cover, and digested any baffling subject I encountered at school. The encyclopedia taught me the difference between the penny, dime, and quarter. I went to the library to study the map of the United States and the rest of the world. I checked out all the American Girl Series Books I could lay my hands on. Through them I learned the history of this new nation I was now a part of. I was exposed to the life of these girls who, like me, lived in a changing world. I read about the native Indian American girl and about the pioneer girl who left her home country to live in America. I lived the life of the girl who endured slavery and the one who lived a rich life in a grand house. My heart broke for the girl who cried during World War II and for the one who survived the Great Depression. I realized how much amusement I received from discovering new information and a new culture.

All my hard work did prove me. I ended fourth grade with an AB average. But as soon as I thought I was academically stable the door slammed my finger again. The sound of the phone vibrated the whole house. I did not flinch on the sofa as I sipped my ice cold strawberry popsicle. I wondered who was calling on such a humid summer day. My question was quickly answered.

“That was your school,” my parents informed me. “They think it best if you enroll in the special education English class.”

I dreaded being known as the kid who went to the “stupid” English class. Another hit to my pride. I could feel the hot tears coming, fighting for a chance to run down my face, but I forced them down.

And again I took this as a chance to prove myself. From the beginning of fifth grade, I took advantage of my special English class. I tried my best to understand everything, devoted myself to reading, and by this time I could communicate fairly well without my accent getting in the way. I was delighted when my hard work resulted in straight A's that year. I had proven to myself that I did not need an advantage. I had lost my pride but now gained confidence and a love for gaining knowledge.

In fourth grade I thought I was alone in my endeavors to succeed in school. I soon realized that many children are struggling like I did. I now tutor English, of all things, to students at an elementary school. These children are experiencing the same issues I had. Their pride wounded as their fingers slammed into the door. My experience has prepared me to help them not only academically but emotionally. I instill in these children the fact that they do not need an advantage in life if they can change their own circumstances. And every time the door slams on their fingers—after their anger has left, after they have cried or faked a smile—they are motivated to improve their circumstance.